

**WUPPERTHAL**  
**REBUILDING HOMES AFTER THE FIRE OF 2018**

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**WUPPERTHAL**  
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**Introduction**

Wupperthal is a remote Moravian Mission settlement in the Cederberg mountains, 350km north of Cape Town. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2018, a fire swept through the village destroying many of the historical central precinct (werf) buildings, as well as 53 homes. Almost immediately, the Rupert Historiese Huise Stigting (which I will refer to as the Rupert Foundation) funded and co-ordinated the appointment of a team of consultants to appraise and document the werf buildings for restoration. Re-building of these structures started on site in August 2019 with completion in May 2021 (Jacobs, 2024). The re-building of the homes however was not included in this work, and this document discusses their re-construction.



Fig 1 Western Cape Context



Fig 2 Aerial Imagery of Wupperthal (Google Earth, 2023)



Fig 3 Wupperthal: A – Central “werf” B – Housing

(Google Earth, 2023)

### Historical Background

Riedmond farm was bought by the Rhenish Church in 1830. The site had good water and pasture. A village of “cottage styled houses” was established by them, close to the Tra-Tra river and 200 metres from the werf which had been established in existing farm buildings (Japha et al., 1992).

Before the arrival of the church, there were already seven farm worker families living on the land in clay and reed huts, as well as numerous Khoisan people who pastured near the river. These families worked for the original owners of the farm and remained on the land after the farm was sold (Bilbe, 1999).

Shortly after the arrival of the missionaries, roughly 100 Khoisan people came to settle in or near Wupperthal. With the spread of word of the missionary church, the number of total Khoisan inhabitants increased to 190 people by 1840 (Bilbe, 1999).

By the mid-19th century, Wupperthal experienced economic and financial growth. The property was extended by the addition of surrounding land parcels that were either purchased by the Rhenish Mission or acquired by means of colonial government grants.

With the gradual scaling down of the Rhenish Mission in South Africa, it was agreed in 1965 that Wupperthal should become part of the Moravian Church, which it remains today. The mission settlement is now made up of the original village of Wupperthal and twelve outlying stations including Langbome, Buekeskraal, and Eselbank. The total area of some 38,000 hectares is owned and managed by the Moravian Church from their Western Cape base in Cape Town.



### Form of Settlement

The first houses of Wupperthal were set out linearly, parallel to the hillside contours from west to east with direct access and visibility to the garden allotments in the river valley in front. The village was extended collaterally up the slope of the hillside with each level of housing receiving its own serving street that were accompanied by perpendicular pedestrian footpaths leading down the slope. These houses were concentrated to the west to be closer to the werf (Japha et al., 1992). The form of settlement has remained unaltered.

The houses were terraced into the existing slope of the site to create level platforms for the respective houses. This intricacy of the layout of the small scaled settlement of houses on the slope allowed for both a synthesis between manmade elements and nature, as well as a cohesive relationship between the public werf space and the residential area of the village (Japha et al., 1992).

### Historical Significance

Wupperthal is one of the few remaining examples of mission settlement vernacular architecture in the country. The significant quality of place is achieved by the way the houses interact with the landscape and topography, how they interact with the street, and how they interact with each other. Each house contributes with a regularity of gabled form, materials, openings, scale and roof pitch, along with a slight irregularity of size and positioning relative to its neighbour. There is a consistent manipulation of the sloping site into various terraces fronting onto the street, which gives the streetscape variety that is shaped by organic growth, but also controlled by a uniformity created by the restricted palette of available building materials. These include thatch for roofs, plastered and whitewashed walls, and painted timber doors and timber and steel windows.

The village and surrounds are part of a proclaimed Heritage Area, as described in Section 31 of the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 (NHRA). As such, any alteration or development to structures in the area requires approval from the Provincial heritage authority, Heritage Western Cape (HWC).

### The Fire

The fire of 2018 claimed one life and left some 200 people homeless. Public donations of money, clothing and consumables were made. Each household was eventually apportioned R72,000 from donations for rebuilding. The Department of Human Settlements constructed temporary housing on the village rugby field. Heritage Western Cape visited the village to assess the damage.



Fig 4 Before (Fai-Ter-Ral-Boy, Dublin, NZ)



Fig 5 After (Halden Krog)

The Rupert Foundation were quick to start assembling a team to document and rebuild the werf buildings. There was little in the way of meaningful action to rebuild the homes. As they were part of a Heritage Area, under Section 31 of the NHRA, documentation including a heritage assessment, plans documenting the proposals for the rebuilding, and a specification of materials and methodology for each house was required by Heritage Western Cape.

Wupperthal occupies an important part of the consciousness of most Capetonian architects. The University of Cape Town's School of Architecture and Planning periodically visited Wupperthal as a site of learning for students, and key practitioners have dedicated time and resources to document the town, with Vivien and Derek Japha, Lucien Le Grange and Revel Fox being prominent amongst these. For much of the Cape architecture fraternity, it is therefore considered a key example of mindful settlement making, of great value to the profession, and to society in general.

The Cape Institute for Architecture (CIFA) recognised this and also the similarities between the Wupperthal fire and the Tulbagh earthquake of 1967, where the Institute played a part in Tulbagh's rebuilding. Whilst the earthquake impacted the countryside on a far greater scale than the fire, it should be considered that the heritage discourse, legacy and focus of the work at Tulbagh centred on the rebuilding of Church Street. The similarity of scale and community need therefore made the comparison between the two seem obvious. CIFA accordingly resolved to offer pro bono assistance to the Wupperthal community in compiling the necessary documentation for submission to Heritage Western Cape to allow rebuilding to proceed. This work would be co-ordinated by CIFA's Heritage Committee, led by the Committee's convenor.

Two well attended meetings to plan a way forward were held at the start of 2019 at CIFA with CIFA volunteers and members of the public who had heard about the initiative and who were willing assist.

The agreed scope of work included:

- 1) Co-ordination with the Moravian Church, as the land-owner.
- 2) Measuring up all 53 houses not only to establish the original plans, elevations and sections, but also to document the extent of the damage to roofs, floors, walls, windows and doors in order to record on the drawings what repair actions needed to be taken for each house.
- 3) Assessing whether there might be an opportunity to remove some of the structures built onto the original stoeps and to reposition the rooms towards the back of the house during reconstruction. This was in an attempt to gain back some of the lost significance of the streetscape through residents having built onto the stoeps in the past without approvals.
- 4) Interviewing all the residents, on site, to work through the remains of their structures to clarify layouts and to discuss suggested changes related to 3) above. It was agreed early on with Heritage Western Cape that the overall area of the houses would not be reduced by these actions, and that the exercise was to rebuild to the plan at the time of the fire, not to correct building transgressions that might have occurred before the fire, unless agreed to by the residents.
- 5) Compiling a repair specification. Fortunately, most of the houses had very similar construction materials, elements and techniques, so one common specification for all was practical.
- 6) Collating the necessary heritage assessments for each house to review its significance, original form and structure, and motivate the proposed rebuilding and repair methodology to Heritage Western Cape.
- 7) Undertaking the submission and presentation of each house to Heritage Western Cape, and attending to any queries from them until the plans were approved.

During that initial phase, what became apparent almost immediately were the differences in responses between the Tulbagh and Wupperthal disasters. Although Wupperthal is arguably of greater heritage significance, following the initial concern by citizens and government for Wupperthal which was reflected in the generosity of donations and material assistance by the public as well as an eventual response by the Department of Human Settlements to build temporary accommodation, the disaster quickly began to fade from the collective consciousness. This was not the case in Tulbagh. Unlike Wupperthal which is owned by the Church, the Tulbagh houses were primarily privately owned and the residents bought into a funded reconstruction proposal. The State was heavily involved, with four provinces and South West Africa (a protectorate at the time that became the independent Namibia) agreeing to Provincial patronship, and the Prime Minister of the country agreeing to be Patron-in-Chief. A National Committee was launched including prominent administrators, conservation bodies (including the South African Institute of Architects, the National Monuments Council, Vernacular Architectural Society, Simon van der Stel Foundation and Historical Homes of South Africa), the Department of Community Development, Dr Anton Rupert, the mayors of Tulbagh and Ceres, and eminent conservationists. (Hoogenhout, 1974) No similar assistance or interest was given for the Wupperthal house rebuilding after the fire.

It is understandable that the Rupert Foundation would concentrate their initial and immediate attention on the werf precinct, as it held the larger civic buildings that made up the important central core of the settlement. They were also able to work solely with the Church, a much easier proposition than working with at least 53 individual residents. There was also an expectation that the Church would rebuild, or assist, in rebuilding the houses. It soon became clear however that the Church had no funds for this. Where the werf buildings had at least some insurance, the system of ownership of the houses where the Church owns the land and the houses are in the care of the residents, meant that insurance fell to the residents. No insurance money was invested into the rebuilding of the houses that were eventually assisted by funding through the Rupert Foundation.

### **The “Community”**

CIFA’s perception of the Wupperthal settlement, and a significant impetus for its involvement, was that the community was a financially challenged, single, coherent entity. Cifa’s work continued under this pretext, but as the work proceeded, this perception changed. Indeed there were 10 houses where residents refused eventual assistance from the Rupert Foundation. Of the remaining 43, the “ownership” was divided into people who lived and worked in Wupperthal; people who lived in Wupperthal and did not work (generally aged); and people who worked and lived in Cape Town and surrounds and used the houses as holiday homes. Although all connected to Wupperthal in their particular way, and with each household known by all the other residents in the manner of a tightly knit community, it was of interest that there was little of the anticipated single, and perhaps utopian, “community” that CIFA had set out to assist.

### **The CIFA Undertaking**

Early in 2019 CIFA met with Heritage Western Cape and representatives from the Department of Human Settlement to co-ordinate action and to ask the Department to assist financially in producing the necessary heritage requirements towards rebuilding. The Department had already employed a Structural Engineer to visit the town to compile a report on the houses. When it was queried as to why they could not also arrange for the required heritage specialists to undertake the work to get the rebuilding process started, they advised that this would be considered as giving State money to the Church, which was not acceptable. CIFA argued that the heritage work was more necessary in the humanitarian crisis than the State funded structural report, but it became apparent that working with the Structural Engineers was an ingrained standard procedure at the Department, whereas taking the more beneficial step of appointing a Heritage Consultant was not.

The meeting established that CIFA would have to proceed unassisted by the Government. This was reaffirmed at a later meeting between the Church, the Department of Human Settlement and CIFA at the Church's head office in Wetton where the Department again advised that they could not be seen to be giving monetary assistance to a private body such as a Church.

Documentation was therefore required and a call went out to the CIFA membership for any information and plans that might be available for use as a base for developing the necessary documentation. Following all the academic analysis through the years there was surprisingly little material. Focus of studies had primarily been on the werf buildings. There were no plans of the houses. The most valuable find was a set of photographs taken in 1979 from front and back of all the houses by Revel Fox Architects (examples Figs 6 and 7). These formed a baseline for all the later heritage assessments and were eventually included on all assessment sheets.



Fig 6 Photo of front of 9 Middel Street  
(Revel Fox & Partners, 1979)



Fig 7 Photos of back of 9 Middel Street  
(Revel Fox & Partners, 1979)

After approaching various surveying practices to perhaps assist with developing the basic layout drawings, Cape Survey offered pro bono assistance. They offered to undertake a point cloud scan of the buildings using a drone, augmented by scanning at ground level. After numerous delays in getting the drone down to Cape Town, it eventually arrived in Wupperthal on a stormy weekend in May 2019. Because of the inclement weather, the operators were only able to survey part of the settlement, and although architectural practices had offered the use of their software and expertise to translate the scans into usable documentation, the results were vague and not definitive (Fig 8 and 9). It was concluded that CIFA would have to find volunteers to measure up the buildings on site.





Fig 8 Point cloud survey - drone (Cape Survey, 2019)



Fig 9 Point cloud survey - terrestrial (Cape Survey, 2019)

### Work by SEA

Cape Town's School of Explorative Architecture (SEA) had their first intake of students at the beginning of 2019. The educators saw that assistance to the Wupperthal community was analogous with their learning mission and arranged for 12 visiting Masters students from Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism in Ottawa, Canada, supervised by Albert van Jaarsveld, to interact with the community and to survey and draw up the damaged houses (van Jaarsveld et al., 2019). They did this over two visits to Wupperthal. On completion of their work in May 2019, van Jaarsveld offered it to CIFA as a basis for their documentation, and it was gratefully accepted. Although SEA had envisaged seeing the project through to Heritage Western Cape submission, they were advised by HWC that the heritage authority might not accept their credentials to assign or establish the significance of the buildings or to motivate the proposed rebuilding work and specifications. The documentation included photographs (example Fig 10), site survey drawings (example Fig 11), and computer added design (CAD) drawings (example Fig 12), as well as a compiled town plan of the affected buildings (Fig 13). On closing out their work and involvement in Wupperthal, SEA invited CIFA to attend a meeting in Cape Town that they had arranged with residents who were based in Cape Town and those who were able to attend from Wupperthal. The meeting on 24.04.2019 could be considered where charitable commitments were handed over from SEA to CIFA. Remaining documentation was completed by SEA in March. CIFA were also introduced to school teacher Shona Reed, who took up the role of liaison between CIFA and the community for the duration of the approval process and into the re-building process, and whose assistance proved invaluable.

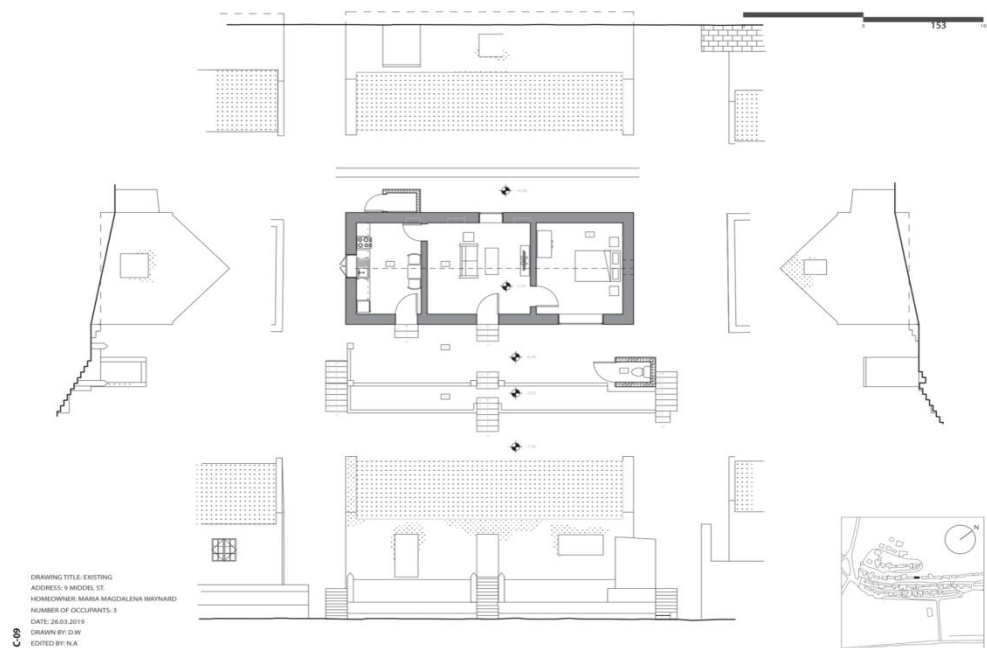
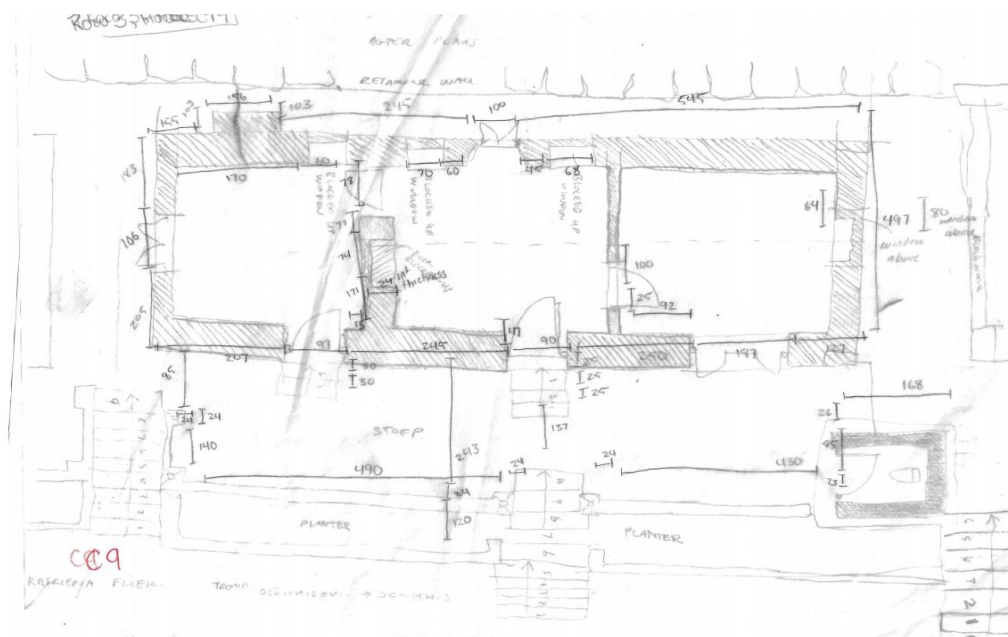






Fig 13 – Students' compiled town plan (van Jaarsveld et al., 2019).

### Work by CIFA

Heritage Western Cape had required three elements towards heritage approval and re-building.

- 1) Heritage assessments
- 2) Repair drawings
- 3) Repair specifications


With the SEA documentation, and the 1979 photographs, CIFA were able to start compiling draft heritage assessments. Once the student documentation had been reviewed and combined into draft assessments, CIFA arranged with the community to visit each of the houses, with the residents. The task was first to confirm the extent of the house with them, and secondly to check the SEA student drawings. The issue around moving elements built onto the stoeps was also discussed and agreed. Some of the houses had no ablutions, and these were positioned on the plans for discussion with the residents so that, even if they could not afford to build them during the restoration, then at least they had approved plans for the future.

The volunteer group had by now whittled away to some eight individuals, four of whom were able to attend the weekend work outings that were made to Wupperthal whilst three others worked with co-ordinating, revising and completing documentation, and the last worked on the draft specification.

To initiate the repair specification, two members visited Wupperthal in November 2019 to research the construction materials and methods through inspection of the burnt out houses. As construction was similar for most of the houses in that part of the town, houses that were not affected by the fire were also visited and their detailed construction and materials noted to guide the accuracy of the specification for the burnt houses.

The assessment format was standardised. It incorporated a statement of significance, the basic information about the house, its description, alterations proposed, comment from the residents, and recommendations (Fig 14).

<b>SITE NAME: 9 MIDDLE STREET, WUPPERTHAL, WESTERN CAPE</b>									
<b>PHYSICAL ADDRESS</b> 9 MIDDLE STREET, WUPPERTHAL, WESTERN CAPE									
<b>ERF/FARM No</b> FARM 168, CLAN WILLIAM									
<b>CO-ORDINATES</b> -32.275199, 19.217985									
<b>OWNER</b> MARIA MAGDALENA WYNAND									
<b>OWNER'S ADDRESS</b> 9 MIDDLE STREET, WUPPERTHAL, WESTERN CAPE									
<b>OCCUPANTS</b> 3									
<b>ARCHITECT/BUILDER</b> UNKNOWN <b>DATE</b> c. 1850									
<b>ORIGINAL USE</b> RESIDENCE <b>CURRENT USE</b> RESIDENCE									
<b>PROTECTION AND GRADING</b>									
±60 YEARS	YES	NATIONAL MONUMENT	NO	GAZETTE NUMBER	N/A	NHRA PROTECTION	S31	PROPOSED GRADING	IIIC
<b>STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE</b>									
<p>The house is part of the group of similar houses, which together form a streetscape of heritage significance. This house is located within the proclaimed Wuppertal provincial heritage site area. The regularity of form, materials, openings, scale and roof pitch; the slight irregularity of size and positioning relative to neighbouring houses, and the consistent manipulation of the sloping site into various terraces fronting onto the road give the streetscape variety, shaped by organic growth and a controlled uniformity created by the restricted palette of available building materials. The house at 9 Middle Street contributes to this grouping. The proposed grading for the house is IIIC.</p>									
<b>SITE AND STRUCTURE ANALYSIS</b>									
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>		<p>The house follows the 'langhuis' typology with straight end gables on the shorter sides and a double pitched (40 – 45 degrees), thatched roof between, with a three-room layout. There is a roof loft door in the north-eastern end gable. By 1979 the house had been extended towards the Bo Street with a small, 'afbak' addition on the back. A freestanding toilet block has been constructed on the front stoep. Both structures were under shallow, mono-pitched, corrugated iron roofs. The elevated front stoep walls are plastered but with some sections of stone-coursing visible, and the lower terrace on Middle Street has similar low walls. There is no evidence of a pergola or trellis in both the 1979 photograph and the recent images. The stoep is accessed via a central, front stair. The house has two doors facing onto the stoep (the central one into the living room, the southern door into the kitchen), as well as a horizontal, steel window with three divisions. A small-paned, steel casement window into the living room is located along the back elevation of the house. A similar steel casement window has been constructed in the southern gable.</p> <p><b>Roof</b> – The main roof, thatched on timber trusses, has been burnt. The small extension to the back and the toilet block on the stoep are roofed with metal sheets that allowed for minimal pitch, and this roofing remains.</p> <p><b>Walls</b> – Clay brick for the core historic 'langhuis'. The front and back additions are of cement block. There is widespread plaster delamination and softened clay brick surfaces, with structural cracking in the add-on rooms built from concrete blocks. There are some shear cracks above the window openings with lintols and door heads collapsed.</p> <p><b>Doors &amp; Windows</b> – Two intact steel windows. All timber doors have been burnt. Roof loft door has been burnt.</p> <p><b>Chimney</b> – Traditional chimney evident in 1979 photographs in southern kitchen gable.</p> <p><b>Floors</b> – The stoep has been surfaced with a cement screed.</p> <p><b>Retaining wall</b> – It appears that all of the retaining walls, front and back, are of packed stonework. The stoep walls have been partially plastered and the walls have been painted white. All appear to be in fair condition.</p>							
<b>ALTERATIONS</b>		<p>Extension to the back of the cottage was done before 1979, and the addition of the toilet block after this date.</p>							
<b>OWNER'S REQUESTS</b>		<p>The owner would like the toilet removed from the front stoep, and a new bathroom constructed to the back of the house, and a metal roof, instead of thatch, due to concerns about fire.</p>							
<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>		<p>The owner's layout request can be accommodated with little impact on the significance.</p> <p><b>Roof</b> – To be built back as per the specification for thatch roofs. Roofing over the back extension and new bathroom to be lean-to Victorian profile sheet metal roof with dark grey integrated paint finish.</p> <p><b>Walls</b> – Original clay brick to be stabilized and finished as per the repair specification. New walls and those of existing cement block extensions to be rebuilt in clay masonry.</p> <p><b>Windows</b> – The steel windows are intact and can be repaired.</p> <p><b>Doors</b> – To be timber framed, ledged, braced and battered doors in timber frames. Reinstall timber door to roof loft.</p> <p><b>Pergola/trellis</b> – None – not in evidence, therefore no reconstruction necessary.</p> <p><b>Retaining/steep walls</b> – The existing stoep and terrace walls are to be preserved and repaired where required.</p> <p><b>Chimney</b> – rebuild chimney to generic specification – check gable wall for position and form.</p>							
<b>REMEDIAL WORK FOR THE TOWN OF WUPPERTHAL, FARM NUMBER 168, WESTERN CAPE</b>									



**IMAGES** (Left to right from top row):

1. 1979 photograph of the front of the house from Middle Street (Revel Fox and Partners, 1979).
2. 1979 photograph of the back of the house from Bo Street (Revel Fox and Partners, 1979).
3. Front elevation of 9 Middle Street (SEA student survey, 2019).
4. Back elevation of 9 Middle Street (SEA student survey, 2019).
5. Photograph of the toilet block that had been added onto the stoep after 1979 (SEA student survey, 2019).
6. View of the north-east gable (SEA student survey, 2019).
7. View of the south-west gable (SEA student survey, 2019).

**REFERENCES:** Revel Fox and Partners, 1979 survey of Wuppertal; SEA student survey, 1979.

Fig 14 - 9 Middle Street - Heritage Assessment page (CIFA)

With the assessments well in hand and the repair specification completed by the start of 2020, the outstanding requirement was for final drawings. COVID had an important part to play in their completion. Although of great assistance, the student drawings, once checked on site were found to have some inaccuracies, and the live drawings were done using various CAD formats. Making revisions was therefore difficult for the few practices and individuals who had responded to the request for drawing assistance. It was decided to try and standardise the drawings. A template with standard scales, font sizes, line thicknesses, hatching types and dimensioning was developed by one of the team members. And then COVID came. Following the first few weeks of confusion it was recognised that CIFA could use the COVID hard lockdown restrictions to their advantage. Whilst people were at home, a new call went out for drawing assistance, and with the standardised drawing template, the uptake was immediate. Over thirty individuals and practices responded (See Annexure A) and by the end of the COVID lockdown most drawings were completed, and with the momentum having been started, the drawings were soon finalised after the lockdown. (Example Fig 15)

All the drawings were checked against resident requirements and site information and were sent to the residents via Ms Reed for their signed approval for the work to be submitted to Heritage Western Cape. The documentation was completed incrementally and HWC set up a special sub-committee of the Built Environment and Landscape Committee (BELCom) to review the submissions more frequently than the monthly BELCom meetings, in order to speed up the approval process.

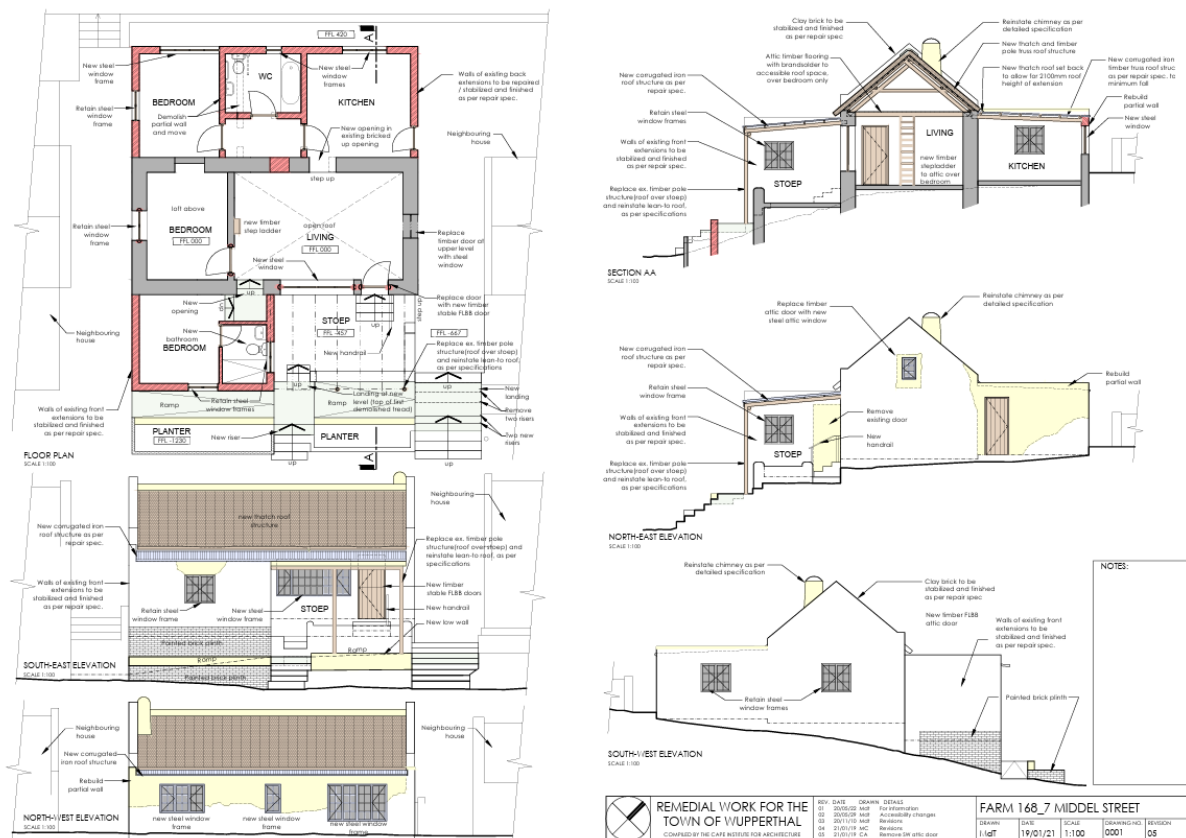


Fig 15 Example of drawing submitted to Heritage Western Cape (CIFA)

### CIFA complete

With the approval by HWC of the last house midway through 2021, CIFA had fulfilled their offer of assistance. A member of the community assisted with submitting the plans to the Cederberg Municipality who readily approved them, initiating the long awaited authorized start of rebuilding. The work had taken two years.

CIFA still had a concern as to how the rebuilding was to be implemented as it was clear that the R72,000 funding that had been raised for each household would not be adequate. Fundraising ideas were being considered. At the same time, the Rupert Foundation were completing the werf reconstruction. They were made aware that documentation had been completed for the houses and that approvals were in place for rebuilding. They recognized that the residential component of the town held important heritage significance, and as approvals were in place resolved to consider keeping the building contractors on site to assist with the house rebuilding.

### Re-building

The R72,000 for each house was held in an account with the building suppliers Build It in Clanwilliam. Building materials could then be drawn down from this amount. Some of the residents had proceeded immediately with reconstruction after receiving HWC and municipal approval. Some had even started before the approvals. Unfortunately, none of this work followed the approved plans which meant that there were transgressions from the outset. Before agreeing to be involved with the re-building of any of the houses, the Rupert Foundation appointed Gabriel Fagan Architects to compile a Status Quo Report to assess the extent of unauthorised work. Once completed at the end of June 2021, this report was copied to HWC. At the instruction of HWC, the Church stopped the transgression works, and HWC arranged for a meeting with Church and the community for mid-July 2021.

To assess the probable costs for repair of transgressions The Foundation instructed the architects to compile a Transgression Report with drawings of each building indicating the deviations from the approved plans and repair specification for costing (example Fig 16). As the indiscretions were by the



residents, the Foundation would limit any intension of rectification funding to major streetscape elements such as roofing material, wallplate height reduction, and gable repair. The documentation was completed at the end of July 2021. HWC requested copy of the documentation so that they could visit the town and decide on what rectification to demand and what compromises would be acceptable related to elements like new opening sizes, aluminium windows, and revised internal layouts. A shift in thinking was occurring where a balance was now required for these transgression buildings between getting people back into houses, and purist conservation intensions. These issues were not resolved until a visit by HWC in May 2022 and a subsequent report by them which guided the work towards rectifying the transgression houses.

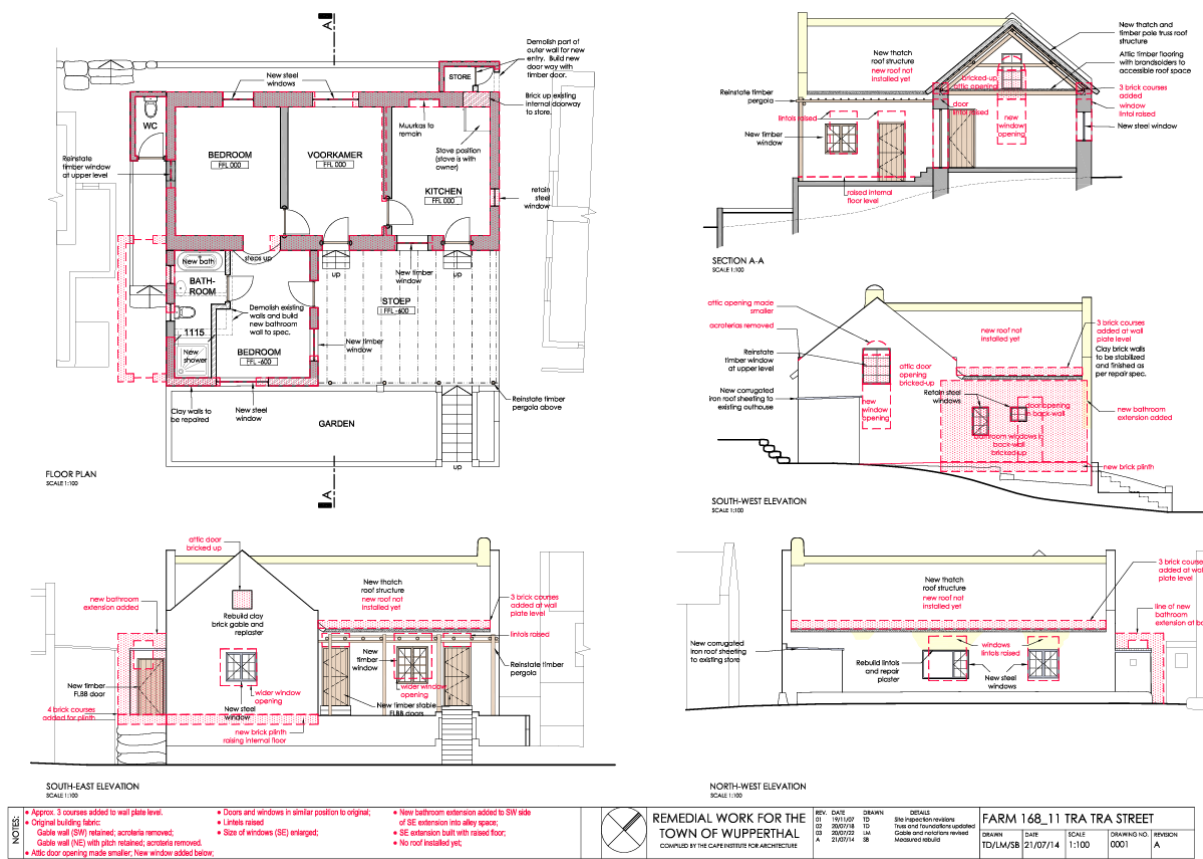


Fig 16 – Transgressions drawing for costing (Gabriel Fagan Architects, 2021)

### Transgressions

The architect’s Transgression Report of July 2021 found that 15 transgression houses were up to wallplate level with no roof, 5 houses had roofs but were generally incomplete, and 5 were complete or nearing completion, being occupied or were locked up. The street plan indicating these categories is included as Fig 17.

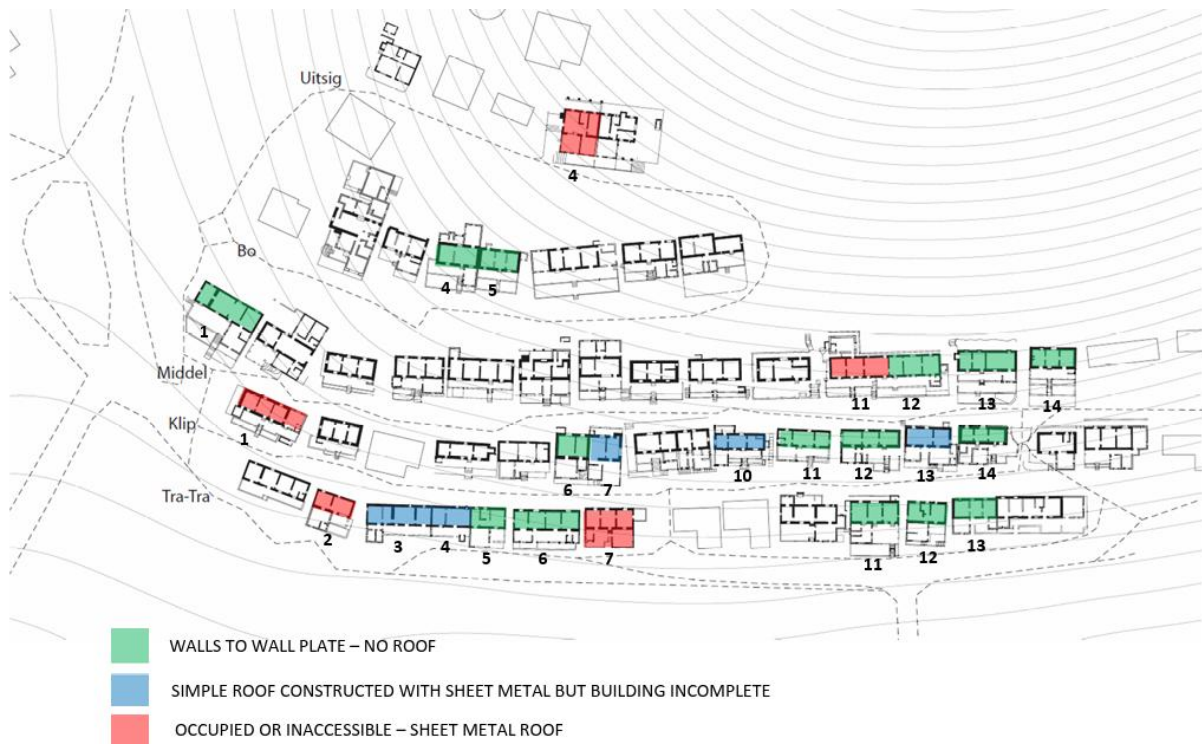


Fig 17 Transgression Houses (Gabriel Fagan Architects, 2021)

These transgressions mainly related to raising the side walls of the houses to gain additional internal height. The walls were built up to the gable acroteria which meant there was no remaining space for a parapet at the gable ends (Fig 18). This in turn led to gables being broken down or being sheeted over to accommodate the new finished roof level (Figs 19 and 20). In other instances the gables had been raised. (Fig 21) . The gables are a prominent part of the streetscape and were nearly all intact after the fire. Fortunately, much of this work was halted by HWC and the Church before roofing commenced and before further damage could be caused to the gables.



Fig 18 – Raised side walls  
(supplied by author)



Fig 19 – Consequence of raising side walls  
(supplied by author)



Fig 20 – Side walls raised and gables covered over (supplied by author)



Fig 21 - Gables raised. (supplied by author)

Of extreme concern was the rebuilding of 7 Tra Tra Street where the wide street side stoep had been incorporated into the house and additional area had been added to the north east side by building into the side lane, all of which was now under a single roof covering the entirety. The old building form or gables were no longer visible. This house remains an over scaled concerning disruption in the middle of Tra Tra Street at the time of writing (Fig 22)



Fig 5 Plan showing additions to the approved floor plan in red

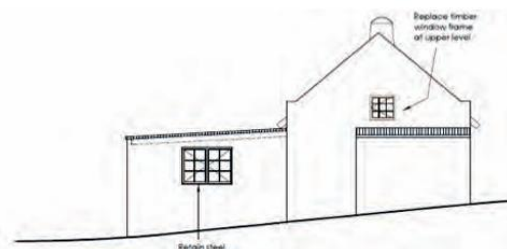


Fig 22 - 7 Tra Tra Street (Gabriel Fagan Architects, 2021)



## Thatch

One element that evoked much discussion through the process was the re-use of thatch as a roof material. The obvious debate was between the aesthetic of the townscape, and the fire risk. In the community consultation that the SEA students undertook three months after the fire, of 33 respondents, 70% favoured thatch and 30% “corrugated iron” (van Jaarsveld et al., 2019). At the outset of discussions between CIFA and HWC, the directive from HWC was that thatch was to be used for the roofs. In a clarification document from the HWC Chief Executive Officer to residents and the Church as late as April 2022, the intention was unambiguous:

*2.2. The reinstatement of thatched roofs is arguably the single most important contributory factor for recovering heritage significance (Heritage Western Cape, 2022).*



Although Wuppertal is known for its skilled thatchers, it was clear that cost was an over-riding issue related to the work towards installing sheet metal roofing that was done prior to or just following approvals to rebuild, and along with probable desperation to get back into the houses, resulted in residents following this course. Thatch was also not available at Build It where the re-building funds had been lodged. In addition, there was an underlying sentiment in the town that HWC would not do anything about it anyway. Although many of the transgression houses were working towards sheet metal roofing, when funding for thatch was offered in a second building phase, it was accepted by most of the residents who reverted to it. One expects however that this would have been reinforced by HWC's letters of non-compliance sent to transgressors. There are still a number of houses under metal sheeting. Now that the comparison can be made, these prove the incongruence of the material in a context such as Wuppertal. After consistent offers to residents to pay for changing the sheet metal on houses to thatch, the Rupert Foundation has eventually withdrawn the offer following the completion of the contracted work and departure of the builders from Wuppertal. The earlier question of whether HWC will do anything of consequence about it is yet to be answered.

### **Rupert Historiese Huise Stigting**

Once the extent of transgressions were understood, the Rupert Foundation agreed to assist only those residents who were transgression free, and would wait for HWC's requirements for the transgression houses before considering funding for those. On-site meetings were then arranged between the appointed project manager, heritage architect and individual residents of the twenty transgression free houses to make the offer of assistance, and to discuss the scope of work that the funding would provide. There was initial reluctance and scepticism by some of the residents around this offer and the acceptance of "white monopoly capital," a concept Johann Rupert was presented as being the face of in a well-publicised radio interview in 2018 (Rupert & Mkhari, 2018). The question of "what do the Ruperts get out of this?" was also asked by a number of residents offered funding. Five owners had already declined assistance.

With acceptances by the residents in place, a Memorandum of Agreement was signed between the Church and the Foundation who agreed to fund the rebuilding of the 19 (later revised to 20) remaining houses that were not affected by the transgressions and where residents had agreed the scope of work which was a "white box" rebuild, focused on rebuilding the essential enclosure elements including walls and roof, windows and doors. The Church would be responsible for supplying the poplar poles necessary for the roofs. Through the reconstruction process however, the Rupert Foundation expanded this scope into a full electrical installation, hot water supply, repairs to floors, painting outside and single internal coat, kitchen cupboard and sink, and plumbing and drainage installation. Work was also extended to the stoeps and the spaces between houses where stormwater management was required. The supply of the poplar poles for all the roofs also eventually devolved to the Foundation when it became apparent that the Church were not assisting with providing these.

Work began on the first 20 houses in November 2021. The builders, Boland Bouers from Worcester, already had good experience in heritage building principles following their two years of work on the werf buildings, instructed by an experienced team of consultants. They were also now well established in Wuppertal following their initial introduction during the werf rebuilding, which had included incidences of stone throwing and demonstrations by members of the community. The enmity had settled down over the course of the werf re-construction and the work commenced on the houses without incident. The majority of the workforce that was brought over to the house building was from Wuppertal and the surrounding villages, and indeed, some of the workforce had houses themselves, or had relatives with houses that were to be re-built.

The houses were all originally constructed of similar sundried clay bricks with daga mortar and plaster, some with stone riser walls especially at the rear of the house where the walls retained the road that was at a higher level than the floor of the house. Out buildings or additions were under "afdak" roofs and their walls were generally of cement brick or block. All of these cement based walls cracked badly

during the fire and the initial structural engineer's report advised demolition. This was done and new clay brick walls were constructed in their place. It was recognised early on during the CIFA work that bargeboards and downpipes should not be included on the afdaks and it is interesting to see the very negative impact that such sensible and seemingly innocuous elements have on the streetscape where they have been installed on some of the transgression houses.

The sundried brick walls withstood the fire well, and it was damage from two winters of exposure that impacted most on these walls. The top of the walls were therefore worst affected and rebuilding was undertaken with old or weathered clay brick, not fresh bricks, to avoid differential movement through expansion. Lime mortar was also used, as well as lime plaster which is far more suitable on the soft brick than a hard cement plaster, which delaminates over time and has no breathability, trapping moisture in the walls and causing eventual failure.

Poplar poles were harvested from Wupperthal and surrounds using local labour and the builder's transport. Stripping the bark off the poles would have been an expensive and time consuming exercise, so poles were used with the bark on. It was found that the donkeys of Wupperthal were partial to the bark, but there were too many poles and too few donkeys for them to be gainfully employed in bark stripping.

As mentioned previously, the Foundation expanded the scope of the work during the construction process to go beyond the basic "white box" structure initially offered, and apart from a final coat of paint internally, the houses were complete for habitation, including electricity and hot water. The average building cost for each house was approximately R700,000.

By September 2022, 14 houses were handed over to residents in emotional circumstances of relief for the people to be back in their own homes. A further 6 houses were handed over in similar circumstances in October 2022. During the handovers, many of the residents trailed the Rupert Foundation representative, Church leaders and Consultants to the home of the next owner and, as a group, toured the house before listening to the words of thanks from the residents, as well as participating in prayers and songs of praise that accompanied most of the handovers.



Fig 23 Completed buildings

### **Transgression repair**

Acting on the transgression report of July 2021 and various enquiries from residents and donors, Heritage Western Cape issued a report in April 2022 entitled “A Way Forward”. Although the report reiterated general heritage principles about reconstruction, it did not assist with resolving how to deal with the individual transgressions related to what variations might be accepted and what should be changed in the pursuit of getting people back into their homes. It did however declare HWC’s final stance on thatch as the required roof finish, as well as being a tangible demonstration to residents, besides site visits and meetings, of HWC’s involvement and concern. It was not until a further visit from HWC in May 2022 and the issuing of the final version of their house by house transgression action report in July 2022 that progress could be made with resubmission of house plans indicating agreed compromises and variations to the approved submissions.

Although the transgressions are acknowledged as being of the residents’ making, this significant delay in response impacted on eventual completion of the affected buildings. Following the issuing of the HWC report, the architects drew up new plans for each of the transgression houses which were submitted for approval as and when the drawings were completed. At the programmed completion of the non-transgression houses in October 2022, 15 more houses were under consideration by the Foundation for rectification and completion. This later increased to 18. This work formed a second phase of construction that started in early November 2022 and was completed in September 2023.

### **April 2024**

At the time of writing, there were still 9 houses that HWC had described as non-compliant. One of the houses, 2 Middel Street, had been left unattended by the residents since the fire and it is feared that it will eventually erode away.

### **Land Restitution**

In his work on Wupperthal in 1999, Bilbe says, “Many of the residents of Wupperthal have been living in houses built by their forefathers, so take great pride in both their home and garden. These residents are constantly plagued by the fear of displacement as they don’t own the land on which their homes are built, despite their families having lived there for over 70 years” (Bilbe, 1999).

This issue was recognised and was being acted upon by the Church with plans being progressed through 2023 for the sub-division of the farm allowing individual title of the houses. Papers were filed by lawyers representing the Wupperthal Community Support Group in August 2023 objecting to the sub-division. The application for sub-division and individual title was withdrawn in February 2024.

John Wilson-Harris

Director, Gabriel Fagan Argitekto Inc.

Past Chair of the Cape Institute for Architecture Heritage Committee

28.04.2024



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## **ANNEXURE A**

### **Rebuilding Wuppertal Houses - CIFA Volunteer group**

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Apologies to any person or practice that assisted but are not included.

John Wilson-Harris 28.04.2024